

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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Dr. Conrad M. Thompson, the author of the following article, is Director of the Department of Evangelism of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (U.S.A.). Graduating from Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1945, he served as pastor of two congregations before coming to his present work in 1951. He began the "P-T-R" as a pioneering evangelistic movement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church and has been spending much of his time recently in helping other churches to adopt the programme.

THE PREACHING-TEACHING-REACHING EVANGELISM MISSION

The Preaching-Teaching-Reaching Evangelism Mission work was begun in the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Headquarters in Minneapolis) in 1952. Except for a few techniques which tie the three basic concepts together there is really nothing new in the "P-T-R" as we have nicknamed it. Preaching, Teaching and Reaching (or witnessing) have always existed in the Christian Church. Basically the programme is a sound Biblical approach to Evangelism. In fact, we sincerely believe that if evangelism is practiced within the context of these three concepts, the fruits of faith would be more constant and there would be less chance to develop a distorted evangelism.

In terms of practical organization, the most important fact for readers of the Monthly Letter who wish to know how it "works" is that the P-T-R programme is congregation-centred. It is worked in and through the local congregation, which we believe to be God's basic instrument for effective evangelism.

General Organization

Congregations numbering from three to 300, depending upon the area, band together in a simultaneous P-T-R Mission, all committed to do the same thing at the same time. Such a cooperative endeavour has many advantages. The weaker congregations are given courage to attempt something big for God. The lethargic congregations are "indirectly" prodded into action. The strong congregations are encouraged to discover an even greater evangelistic task. All agree to follow a set plan and experience has proven that by and large blessings have come in direct proportion to the preparation put in, and participation in the entire three phases of the programme.

Each P-T-R Mission is conducted by a chairman who is a local pastor. Though help, inspiration and the "know how" are available from our Evangelism Office, we insist that the P-T-R is a local area sponsored mission and not run by "officialdom."

The Preaching

Each cooperating congregation in a radius of from one to 100 miles (more or less) invites a guest pastor to preach a series of messages Sunday morning to Thursday night, or longer. Most of the guest pastors are parish pastors who have been used effectively by God to proclaim the Gospel. The evening services are usually informal in nature, using "hymn-sings," choirs, and laymen leading in the devotions (who also occasionally preach or conduct the service). Toward the latter part of the week various types of consecration services are planned in many of the churches bearing in mind the spiritual needs of both Christians and non-Christians. Many congregations, especially in the rural areas, have up to eighty percent of their baptized membership in attendance each night.

The two-fold purpose of the preaching mission is by God's grace to deepen the spiritual life of believers and to win the "unreached" for Christ. Previous intense prayer preparation, great expectation on the part of the worshippers, and the "accumulated Word" have brought many "signs and wonders" from God to thousands of people.

The Teaching

This aspect has at least three parts to it. The first concerns the pastors. Believing that it is difficult to reach the congregation with a programme of evangelism until you first reach the pastor, we set up a four-day "Mission to Pastors" programme, Monday through Thursday during the P-T-R. Our meeting time each day is from 9:30 a.m. to 12:15, which concludes with a dinner at 12:30-1:15. At first pastors thought they were too busy, but when they realized what these sessions did, they rarely were absent. What the evening services do for the people we pray the morning sessions will do for the pastor - by God's grace to lift him spiritually and to encourage him. The best in lecturers are engaged (in our church they are usually full-time evangelism staff members) who lead the pastors in Bible study, prayer, the theology of evangelism, preaching, the ministry, and topics on the practice of parish evangelism. Hundreds of letters in my file testify to the fact that the 1000-1200 pastors participating in our P-T-Rs each year have found the "Mission to Pastors" sessions among the most vital they have ever attended. The pastor's most urgent needs are met during these sessions.

The second group to be taught are the lay visitors. They are instructed in six to twelve sessions before the P-T-R begins. We are constantly trying to strengthen this aspect of the programme in order to develop spiritually-concerned skilled personal "evangelists".

The third teaching opportunity comes when the guest pastor, in addition to his preaching services, meets with special leadership groups within the congregation such as, the official boards, organizational leaders, teachers, etc.

The Reaching

This also consists of three different phases. In America, if an effective job of evangelism is to be done, each congregation must know its community - who are the "reached" and who are the "unreached". This

necessitates a "religious canvass" about every two or three years. The congregation then establishes a responsibility list of both members (the inactive) and non-members who may be prospects for the church.

The second phase of the "Reaching" is to send teams of lay people to visit all of the members of the congregation prior to the mission week, in order to enlist their prayer and attendance support.

The third phase is to send trained lay visitor teams to call on the "unreached". They also invite and encourage them to attend the preaching services during the P-T-R Mission and on succeeding Sundays. Those who do not respond to the invitation to attend the services are visited again during the mission week itself. Out from this experience of calling, many lay visitors are inspired to continue in a year-round evangelism programme of regular visitation - ever being trained to more effective Christian witness.

Prayer

Months of intensive prayer preparation is encouraged at worship services, cottage meetings, organizational meetings and in daily family devotions. The cottage meetings usually emphasize Bible study followed by prayer for the P-T-R Mission. They are led by lay leaders who have previously been trained by the pastor. Every third or fourth week all of the groups meet in the church and the study is then led by the pastor.

Finances

Offerings are taken in each participating congregation each evening of the P-T-R Mission. These are "pooled" in a common treasury and from it are paid the travelling expenses of both guest and host pastor, advertising costs, literature, the noon meals during the Mission to Pastors sessions, etc. With this unique financial arrangement the small congregation has as much opportunity to participate in the complete programme as does the large congregation. If there are surplus offerings they are given to the work of evangelism in the church at large.

Results?

Of course, only God knows. But, humanly speaking, in American Lutheranism they have been many. The thousands of lay visitors have received some kind of positive commitment from one out of every three or four calls they have made. Thousands were enrolled in the pastor's church membership classes, additional thousands were brought to the Lord in Holy Baptism, were enrolled in church school and many thousands indicated their desire for church membership. In one church body alone there were more than 97,000 such commitments.

But important, too, are the news of congregations which experienced spiritual awakening, hundreds of pastors who testify of new inspiration and strength in Christ and of thankfulness for many helps in practical evangelism, and a new concern for people for whom Christ died engendered in the lives of church members. These, together with the several million who have attended the services, where God has spoken to them through His Word, add up to the expectation that there have been and will be many "signs and wonders".

American or New Testament?

As early as 1954 Christians of Norway began making plans for P-T-Rs (now called Evangelical Action Week) and today the movement has spread all over Norway with as good or better response than in America. British Guiana

sponsored a P-T-R and the results were miraculous. Helsingfors has recently conducted one in 25 congregations and Zululand in South Africa is also making plans to begin one there. The P-T-R Mission idea has spread to all of the major Lutheran churches of America, not always called by the same name, but nevertheless the same plan bringing untold blessings, not only the first time but again and again. The tying together of the three New Testament concepts - Preaching-Teaching-Reaching - has brought us a balanced, doctrinally sound Christ-centred and Holy Spirit motivated programme of evangelism. It's not just American - it belongs to the world.
